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## **Developing peer mentoring support for TAFE students entering first year university early childhood studies**

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# **Developing peer mentoring support for TAFE students entering first year university early childhood studies**

## **Abstract**

At Queensland University of Technology (QUT, Australia), in the Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood), Technical and Further Education (TAFE) students (with a Diploma) enrol with Advanced Standing (one year's credit). These students share many challenges faced by first year university students – workload, technology, academic orientation and application. They also experience feelings of isolation and uncertainty in dealing with the “university culture” (Cantwell & Scevak, 2004; Dickson, 2000). Often, they do not perform as well academically and their attrition rates are higher than those for first year students and the remainder of the BEd (EC) cohort (Strategic Information & Analysis Division of Finance, Resources, Planning, QUT, 2003). This project addresses issues facing these students in their transition to University by developing an integrated and contextualised mentoring program designed specifically for their needs. Nine Early Childhood third and fourth year students were enlisted as mentors to groups of approximately six transition TAFE students. In this paper we discuss the dynamics of the mentoring scheme and future directions for mentoring projects within the BEd (EC).

## **TAFE to university transition**

Although the issues influencing the transition to first year university for students generally are well known (e.g., McInnis, James, & Hartley, 2000; Peat & Hewitt, 1998), little attention has been directed to identifying issues unique to students from a Technical and Further Education (TAFE) background. Of the few studies that have been conducted in this area (Cameron, 2004; Cantwell & Scevak, 2004; Pearce, Murphy, & Conroy, 2000; Peat, Grant, & Dalziel, 2000), all allude to issues arising from the contrast between the competency based orientation of TAFE and the theoretical orientation of university. This holds implications for subject content, assessment, and understanding what is expected at university. Each study also identified the physical size and complexity of the university campus and classes; adjusting to numerous competing deadlines; developing a more independent style of learning; and still developing skills in assignment writing, critical thinking, problem solving and information technology skills as salient issues. Pearce et al. (2000) highlighted the divergence between TAFE and university assessment as significant, with university assessment involving complex technical tasks and independent research, coupled with the limited amount of ongoing assessment restricting the amount of performance feedback provided prior to the end of semester exam. Also, university teaching styles and materials present problems for TAFE students as they require them to be reliant on their note-taking skills, which tend to be inadequate/under-developed (Pearce et al., 2000).

Of particular relevance to our study is research conducted by Dickson (2000), that examined transitional issues unique to TAFE child care graduates beginning a university teaching degree. In addition to factors already mentioned, Dickson highlighted social issues associated with the articulation. With respect to staff and student interactions, she noted that TAFE students were reluctant to seek assistance with the preparation of assignments or to seek feedback on them. Efforts to facilitate the transition to university for first year students have included transition programs targeted for specific faculties' requirements (McInnis, James, & Hartley, 2000); academically oriented peer support programs (Ashwin, 2003; McInnis, James, & Hartley, 2000; Weisz & Kemlo, 2004) reciprocal peer tutoring (Rittschof & Griffin, 2001); online support (e.g., O'Reagan, Geddes, Howe-Piening, & Quirke, 2004); and mentoring programs (e.g. Drew et al., 2000; Fowler, 2004; Pollock, & Georgievski, 1999). In addition, transition programs have been designed specifically for TAFE graduates (e.g., Dickson, 2000; Peat, Grant, & Dalziel, 2000) in response to issues such as those mentioned above.

## **Theoretical rationale for mentoring programs**

Planning interventions to aid the transition of students requires an understanding of the distinction between the learning processes involved in TAFE and in university. Of particular

relevance to our study are models of learning processes highlighting the factors involved in aiding the transition from externally regulated learning that characterises TAFE study to the more self-regulated learning that characterises university study. The learning oriented teaching (LOT) model proposed by Ten Cate and colleagues is one example (Ten Cate, Snell, Mann, & Vermunt, 2004). This model suggests that the learning process involves the interplay of factors at three different levels, cognitive, affective and metacognitive. The cognitive level is marked by concerns of what content to study, the affective level involves concerns about motivation to study, and the metacognitive level involves concerns about how to study.

According to the LOT model, the overall transition from external to self-regulated learning entails a transition at each level (Ten Cate et al., 2004). As such, success in making this transition is dependent on the elements of teaching and educational interventions being able to address concerns at each level. Ten Cate and colleagues (2004) propose that addressing the cognitive level involves facilitating the provision of relevant information, addressing the affective level involves motivating students to have a vested interest in their study, and addressing the metacognitive level involves instructing students in how to study. Interventions, however, must address all the levels of learning in a way that does not reinforce existing patterns of externally-regulated learning, but instead encourages steps towards more self-directed learning. Vermunt and Verloop (1999) have reinforced this idea by emphasising the importance of finding the appropriate balance between guidance and self-regulation in education. They call this establishing *constructive friction*. Failure to achieve this constructive friction may result in inadequate learning for students (Weiner, 1979).

The amount of guidance required to achieve constructive friction may vary depending on the student (Boekaerts, 1999). Ten Cate and colleagues (2004) describe three different levels of guidance: (1) full external guidance from the teacher only as exemplified in TAFE courses, (2) shared guidance where the teacher and student work together, and (3) full internal guidance where the student regulates their own learning independently of the teacher. It might be argued that in the absence of any intervention, the level of guidance received by students at university is the third level: internal. Yet for some students, particularly those who might have difficulties with self-regulation of study (for example TAFE or alternative entry students), this might be inadequate for achieving constructive friction, and shared guidance would be necessary.

For shared guidance to occur, it has been suggested that a teacher or mentor must be able to engage with students in an ongoing dialogue, monitor their progress, and adapt the information they provide to them to their perceived needs (Ten Cate et al., 2004). University classes are too large for lecturers to provide such shared guidance. However, employing mentors responsible for overseeing small groups of students is one strategy through which shared guidance may be achieved. For this reason, the use of mentoring groups as a form of supportive intervention was considered appropriate for the target group in our study, as the mentors and mentoring groups were expected to facilitate such shared guidance.

### **Characteristics of successful mentoring programs**

The structure of mentoring programs can vary depending on the target faculty or discipline. However, there are some key characteristics that are consistently cited as contributing to effective programs, and that correspond with those characteristics identified by Rolfe-Flett (2000) as being critical to the success of mentoring programs. These include the characteristics of the mentor, the size of the mentoring group, the sustainability of the program, the presence of a coordinator, ongoing monitoring and evaluation, and a multidimensional approach.

With regard to the characteristics of mentors, it has been suggested that using other university students in their second or final year rather than academic staff may yield more successful outcomes. First year students may be reluctant to approach or question academic staff and have difficulty relating to them (Grob, 2000; for an exception see Muldoon & Godwin, 2003). Some programs seek to further enhance the mentor-mentee relationship by matching

these pairs on the basis of similar interests or demographics (e.g., Drew, Pike, Pooley, Young, & Breen, 2000; Fowler, 2004). In support of this, a study of Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) groups by Weisz & Kemlo (2004) found that PAL leaders who share commonalities with the students in their groups were more effective in supporting their learning. Also, selecting mentors with a strong academic background and using interview procedures to assess the suitability of mentor candidates contributed to a more successful program (Clulow, 2000; Drew et al., 2000; Weisz & Kemlo, 2004).

The importance of a multidimensional approach to mentoring is evident when comparing outcomes of programs focusing exclusively on providing tutoring in subject content, with those including coaching in more general academic skills, orientations to the library and IT facilities, and opportunities to develop social networks. For example, Rittschof and Griffin's (2001) reciprocal peer tutoring program focused only on tutoring subject content and while this resulted in improved grasp of course content, it did not result in decreased test anxiety, nor did it increase feelings of self-efficacy. In contrast, students engaged in more multidimensional programs such as those of Fowler (2004) and Drew et al. (2000) reported decreased stress, improved self-esteem and confidence, and a variety of social benefits, such as increased interactions with peers and academics and improved communication skills. Importantly, the level of support received by students in the program of Drew et al. enabled a follow-on effect where students extended the support they received to other first year students who were not involved in the program.

The support provided to both mentors and mentees in such programs might also have implications for the continued success of these programs. Mentors may receive payment for their service (e.g., Clulow, 2000; Weisz & Kemlo, 2004) or alternatively academic support in the form of credits awarded towards their subjects (e.g., Pollock & Georgievski, 1999). Other support for mentors is provided through training in all the practical and academic components of the mentoring program (e.g., Drew et al., 2000; Fowler, 2004; Pollock & Georgievski, 1999), or training in various interpersonal skills of relevance to implementing the program (e.g. Drew et al., 2000; Fowler, 2004). In some cases support comes from a mentoring program coordinator from whom advice can be sought (e.g. Drew et al., 2000).

For mentees, the types of support provided are exemplified in the components of the various mentoring and peer support programs. Academic support is provided in various forms such as tutorials to review course content in a more concentrated manner (e.g., Clulow, 2000; Weisz & Kemlo, 2004); training in academic skills such as assignment writing, referencing, and strategies for exams (Muldoon, 2004; Trafford, 2003); and orientation to the university campus, particularly, how to use the library and IT facilities (e.g., Drew et al., 2000). Social support can include social events to meet with mentors and other mentees (Drew et al., 2000; Peat et al., 2000), regular meetings with the mentor and opportunities to discuss the progress of the mentoring program with stakeholders (e.g. Fowler, 2004; Muldoon, 2004), as well as introducing mentees to student support services (Drew et al., 2000).

### **Social support and the university transition**

Another reason for favouring a mentoring program, in particular, a program with an emphasis on forming student relationships, is the well known effect of social support on the first year transition (see for example, Darlaston-Jones, Cohen, Drew, Haunold, Pike, & Young, 2001; Long, 1994; Peat, Grant, & Dalziel, 2000; Peel, 2000; Tinto, 1995; Zimitat, 2003). In a review of the first year transition, Darlaston-Jones and colleagues (2001) identified social support that university students received from their peers as a significant factor in predicting attrition. Specifically, the lower levels of social support found among external students compared to internal students were found to be associated with greater feelings of being disconnected from the university, and, as a result, higher withdrawal rates. Other studies have also identified feelings of isolation and being disconnected from the university as being associated with a greater susceptibility to withdrawal (Peel, 2000; Tinto, 1995). This further reinforces the

importance of providing social support in transition programs, as social support may be effective in helping to alleviate these feelings.

Enhancing students' levels of social support through mentoring might also assist in reducing feelings of uncertainty associated with the first year transition. According to uncertainty reduction theory (URT), when individuals encounter uncertainty in their environment, they are motivated to seek information to reduce this uncertainty (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). The social networks provided by mentoring groups may act as vehicles for providing the information and resources that such individuals in transition seek. Indeed, obtaining such information from peer networks appears an effective method of uncertainty reduction in transitions generally (Jackson, Schuler, & Vredenburg, 1987), and in other transition contexts such as adapting to organisational transfers (Kramer, 1996) and adapting to new cultures (Adelman, 1988).

In addition, there is evidence from social identity theory that self-categorisation in a social group may help reduce feelings of subjective uncertainty (Mullin & Hogg, 1998). In the study presented here, the social identity attached to membership in a mentoring group may help reduce feelings of uncertainty by providing a gauge of normative behaviour, and the security of potential future group membership. Although the effects of social support and group membership on uncertainty reduction have not been directly examined in the context of the first year transition to university, from the evidence above, it could be argued that their applications may also extend to the university transition context.

### **Rationale for our study**

At Queensland University of Technology (Australia), in the Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood), TAFE students (with a Diploma) enrol with Advanced Standing (one year's credit). However, these students are regarded as first year students for the purposes of support in the *First Year Experience* program. The TAFE students share many of the challenges faced by first year students – expectations, workload, technology, academic orientation and application (McInnis, James, & Hartley, 2000). In addition to some of these students possessing poor academic and technology skills, an overwhelming challenge faced by many is their feeling of isolation and uncertainty in dealing with the “university culture” (McInnis, James, & Hartley, 2000).

Attrition rates for TAFE students in the BEd (EC) have risen in the last few years, from 5.9% in 1998 to 16.7% in 2001 (Strategic Information & Analysis Division of Finance, Resources, Planning, July, 2003). These rates are higher for TAFE students than other first year students and the remainder of the cohort; for example, in 2001, attrition rates for TAFE students were 16.7%, compared with 13.1% for first year students and 9.5% for the remainder of the cohort (Strategic Information & Analysis Division of Finance, Resources, Planning, July, 2003). Learning outcomes for the TAFE students do not compare favourably with other students – their course Grade Point Average (GPA) is lower than that for all the students (e.g., in 2001, TAFE average course GPA was 4.33 compared with 4.48 for all students – Strategic Information & Analysis Division of Finance, Resources, Planning, July, 2003). It is feasible to argue that a program of support may alleviate these circumstances and lead to improved participation and outcomes for these students.

The aim of our study was to develop and trial a mentoring program designed to address the particular issues facing TAFE students entering the BEd (EC) in their transition to University and to develop an integrated and contextualised program of support designed specifically for their needs (c.f., McInnis, James, & Hartley, 2000). The mentoring program thus had a particular emphasis on addressing the transition from external to internal self-regulation of learning and on reducing uncertainty and isolation through enhanced social support.

## Methodology

**Design.** This was a mixed-method study employing a quantitative and qualitative survey completed by mentees, and qualitative reflections completed by mentors. Mixed method designs yield a more complete analysis as the data complement each other, are richer, and more valid; such studies also result in more reliable findings than studies that employ either qualitative or quantitative methods alone (Creswell, Fetters, & Ivankova, 2004; Frechtling & Sharp, 1997). A further advantage of employing a mixed-method approach is the likelihood of increasing the acceptance of findings and conclusions by those who have a vested interest in the study. Some descriptive statistics have been extracted from the quantitative survey questions and re-presented here, but the major focus of this paper is the analysis of the qualitative data comprising mentees' written responses to survey questions, and mentors' reflections, and informal emails from the mentees to us. The mentoring scheme continued throughout first semester of the first year of university study for the participants.

**Participants.** All participants were students in the BEd (EC) at Queensland University of Technology, a four-year full-time/internal teacher preparation program. Participants were drawn from two groups within the program.

Group one (the mentors) was drawn from third- and fourth-year students (n=22) who had successfully completed a health and wellness elective unit that focused on preparation for counselling and social interventions at an introductory level. One of the program coordinators contacted twenty-two potential mentors by telephone and eleven agreed to participate. The intention was to employ students who had been TAFE entry students; however, only one such student fitted that criterion. One other student who had entered QUT as a second year student from an interstate university stated that she was empathetic to the transition problems that TAFE students experience. Ten mentors attended an induction training session and following this session one withdrew because of other commitments. The purpose of the induction training session was threefold:

- First, to explore how, as a peer advisor, mentors could enhance transition students' awareness of wellness and its role in academic success;
- Second, to detail the University resources available to support students in the program such as academic skills advisors, free programs and courses, the First Year Experience program, and health, counselling and international student support services; and
- Finally, to describe the process for using journaling to document their experiences as mentors.

Group two (the mentees) was drawn from first year students (n=220) identified by university enrolments as having a background in study at TAFE or alternative entry (e.g., work experience, mature age). Typically, the TAFE students had completed a range of Diplomas, the most common of which was the Diploma of Community Services (Children's Services). Alternative entry students comprised a variety of entry requirements, including at least ten years' work experience. Many of these alternative entry students had poor school academic records or no school record at all. To recruit mentees, we attended a mass lecture in week one, accompanied by one enthusiastic mentor, to explain the project. All students present at the lecture completed a short survey to (a) obtain demographic information on the cohort, and to identify their pathway into university; (b) elicit their expectations of university life, anticipated strengths and challenges and views on a mentor scheme; and (c) identify those interested in participating in a mentor scheme. Forty-eight first year students volunteered.

The intent was to allocate mentees to mentors on a geographical basis because it was predicted this would provide more convenient meeting opportunities, but in the majority of cases, this was not possible. Mentors received the email, mail and telephone contact details of mentees and first meetings were set up by them using email. The collated information regarding the students' perceived "challenges" (identified from the initial survey) was forwarded to the mentors, to form the basis of their first meeting with their mentees and to establish support

mechanisms. Ongoing contact (in the form of face-to-face meetings, email and phone contacts) between each mentor and his/her group of mentees continued throughout the semester. Mentors were encouraged to write reflective comments following each meeting and to email these reflections to one of us. A website entitled MATES (Mentors Assisting Transition Education Students) was established for mentors and mentees. It contained contact details for mentors, links to student learning support services, a discussion forum and opportunity for feedback and comments. The MATES site was linked to two core first year Early Childhood units.

### **Data analysis**

The qualitative data, that is the mentors' reflections, mentees' emails, and qualitative survey responses were pooled and read by all members of the research team. An interpretive-descriptive approach using the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) of data analysis was employed. Maykut and Moorehouse (1994) explain interpretive-descriptive research as exploratory and reliant on people's words and meanings. This was an iterative process in which transcripts were read and reread to determine recurring issues. The research team negotiated meanings as a group until agreement was reached. Finally, this resulted in several categories of experiences involved in the mentor program.

### **Findings**

Many lessons were learnt from this trial transition mentoring process. Insights gained are discussed under four main themes that emerged from the data and were perceived as significant: *personal qualities of mentors, academic support, support for mentors and understanding attrition*. The initial findings indicate several positive aspects to the mentoring program. There were also some challenges that emerged for both mentors and mentees.

**Personal qualities of mentors.** Mentees often spoke about the mentoring program in terms of their mentor. Specifically, this related to the personal qualities of their mentor that either facilitated the mentoring process or proved to be challenging. As such, this category was further defined into two sub-categories, positive experiences and challenging experiences.

*Positive experiences.* Personalities and general qualities of the mentors appeared to play an important part in positive aspects of the mentoring program. Many mentees reported that their mentor facilitated the academic, practical, social and emotional support they received. This was evidenced by mentees attesting to detailed support from mentors in helping to alleviate their anxiety and in reassuring them. It was also evidenced in statements reflecting close bonds forming within groups and that this was nurtured by mentors.

[Mentor] put our minds at rest with exam anxiety... More than anything the mentoring program helped in my transition to university.

Our mentor was able to provide us with many details often skipped over by staff; for example, the essential items to take to the exam room.

[Mentor]...provided us with a practical task in the library to help our catalogue searching skills... She also was able to tell us/me things you can't find and often don't find out easily... [Mentor] also gave us a lot of information on exam preparation which was useful – even down to parking details.

I have formed a close bond with all the members of our group and an extremely supportive network which I know will help me through the remaining years of my course. Although the mentoring program has officially finished, our group decided to continue our regular meetings.

The last two comments came from two members of one group, whose mentor also believed that she had benefited from the opportunity to mentor the students:



I am still meeting with [my mentees] every couple of weeks... I have made some great friends out of this and have been able to organise and motivate myself better as well.

These statements attest to the positive personality of the mentor contributing to group dynamics. Those mentors who were encouraging, reassuring, and willing to put themselves out to meet with or contact their mentees contributed to the support perceived by the mentees. While all mentors mentioned the difficulties of contacting and arranging suitable times with their group members, some mentors put in a great deal more effort than others. Two mentors in particular voiced their frustration at not being able to contact their mentees and time meetings where all mentees would/could attend. In contrast, mentors who were more successful at both contacting and meeting with their mentees did not rely only on email. They also used telephone and SMS. They were also prepared to arrange several meetings to accommodate the students. In fact, one mentor arranged three different meetings in one week to meet with all her mentees.

While the positive attitudes of the mentors contributed to the positive outcomes for the mentees, personalities of the mentees also affected the dynamics of the groups. By chance, one very successful group consisted of women all over the age of thirty and all with children. While the students in this group agreed that the mentor contributed to the success of the group, they also suggested that,

...friendships and support that we have developed has also been a contributor – even if it is just to bounce a concern off someone and to hear that they are feeling the same!

*Challenging experiences.* While most mentoring experiences were positive, there were some challenging instances that can be attributed to personal qualities of both mentors and mentees. The differing levels of commitment demonstrated by mentors were clearly evident during field experience when most of the mentors were absent from campus for four weeks (out of 13 weeks). Many mentees perceived this as detrimental to the program, as mentors failed to keep in contact with mentees.

Our mentor was away at prac most of the semester

My mentor went away on prac for six weeks.

These statements may be exaggerations (the practicum only lasted for four weeks), yet the mentees obviously perceived the intrusion of field experience as negative, because of the withdrawal of their mentors. However, some of these negative perceptions could be attributed to the mentors. While the mentors were encouraged to maintain contact during their off campus field experience in schools, some did not do so. These mentors were the same ones who voiced frustration at the mentoring program overall. In fact, one mentor did not make further contact for another week after returning from field experience, because “*I was very exhausted.*” Another was asked to withdraw from the program as there were complaints from her group that she had not organised meetings and was not at all supportive. In contrast, one mentor not only maintained email and phone contact during field experience, she also shared her field experiences with her mentees. This was positive in terms of helping to demystify this often stressful component of the mentees’ future studies.

Another challenge to the program could also be attributed to a mentee’s personal qualities. While most mentees were apprehensive about their transition to university study (evidence from initial surveys and reflections from initial mentor meetings), one student came to the first group meeting with very rigid ideas and was very vocal. This student was identified as a person who might require assistance in the transition to university as previous experience had not involved much formal education. Therefore, this student was purposely allocated to a mentor whom we believed would be excellent because of her assertive and positive personality. Unfortunately, this student ceased attending the sessions.

We were aware of another student who had experienced many personal problems during a previous attempt to study in the same course. She was also allocated to the same mentor. This

student completed the semester successfully (GPA of 5 – on a 7-point scale), and attributed her success directly to the mentor.

I absolutely believe that the mentoring program contributed to my results. [Mentor] was very supportive and helpful when it came to questions regarding assignments and exams. She was wonderful.

Overall, while most mentees agreed that the mentoring program contributed positively to their first semester experiences by providing academic and social/emotional support, reducing stress, helping in transition issues and with understanding the requirements of university, there were mentees who did not have such positive experiences. As noted above, these often could be attributed to the quality of the mentor – not arranging meetings or, in some instances, knowing less than the mentees. However, even mentees who complained about their mentors agreed that the mentoring scheme was beneficial for those who had more supportive mentors.

**Academic support.** One of the aims of the project was to improve academic outcomes. While the time span is too short to indicate whether this aim has been achieved, initial results are promising. The average GPA for the TAFE mentees for semester one was 4.5. While this does not indicate any startling results, the GPA is higher than the average course GPA for TAFE students and higher than the average GPA for all students (Strategic Information & Analysis Division of Finance, Resources, Planning, July, 2003). Further, of all first year students who obtained a GPA of 6 or above (n=6), three participated in the mentoring program.

The MATES web site was developed over the course of the semester, and was launched half way through the semester. It appears that the mentees accessed it. Results of the student post survey indicate that 59% of the students had accessed the site, and 58% found it either very helpful or moderately helpful. Thirty-one percent of students found it not at all helpful. Access and utility of the web site might have been improved if the site had been live earlier in the semester. Further investigation into the usefulness of a web site is warranted.

**Support for mentors.** While support for the mentees was the main focus of the program, aspects of the study related to support for the mentors also emerged. The mentors participated in a training session to explore how they could enhance students' awareness of wellness and its role in academic success and to detail the University resources available to support students in the program. These resources included academic skills advisors; free programs and courses; the First Year Experience program; and health, counselling and international student support services. The mentors were neither expected nor encouraged to act as counsellors or academic advisors. They were advised to direct the mentees to professionals who could deal with these issues. However, many of the mentors took on these roles, and in so doing, occasionally contacted us to discuss the more serious issues. Also, some of the mentors lacked expertise in directing the mentees to the appropriate services, although they had covered these issues in their training. We perceived that the mentors required more support during the semester.

**Understanding attrition.** It is too soon to make definitive comments on the attrition rate; however, some attrition has already been noted. While there are many reasons for attrition, these reasons are rarely identified in university data. The mentors in this study wrote reflections throughout their mentoring experience and in doing so have identified some of the reasons for attrition. For example, one mature age student was a mother of six who lived quite a distance from the university. The mentor recognised the extra stress that this student was experiencing and advised her to seek advice from the course coordinator about reducing her study load from four units to three units. While the student was more at ease after doing so, she ultimately withdrew from the course. Three more students withdrew from the course. One of the students withdrew to enrol in further TAFE studies.

On reading the mentor reflections relating to these students it was obvious that they were experiencing difficulties that they could not deal with. Some of the warning signs included lack of response to emails and non attendance at group meetings. While the mentors recognised the

difficulties experienced by these students and suggested other support, the students withdrew anyway. Often, the mentors felt disappointed.

I do feel I should have followed closer with phone calls when she never replied to the numerous emails.

In contrast to the attrition figures, one student stated that the reasons she maintained her enrolment could be directly attributed to the mentoring program.

I honestly think without our weekly catch up over coffee I may have taken the easy road and walked out about Easter time.

## **Discussion**

Students commencing university for the first time often face challenges in an environment that is unfamiliar and comprises teaching and learning that is theoretical and aimed towards the self-regulated learner (Zimmerman, 2000). This is particularly the case for students who have completed a course at TAFE or who commence university study on alternate entry. In the Bachelor of Education (EC) at QUT, these students enrol with Advanced Standing (one year's credit) into university. They often experience challenges involving expectations, workload, technology, academic orientation and application (McInnis, James, & Hartley, 2000). The study reported here set out to examine the experiences of TAFE and alternate entry students who participated in a mentoring program during their first year of university study. The purpose of the mentoring program was to address specific issues facing these students. The findings of this study will inform subsequent development of a more integrated and contextualised program of support. The key issues regarding mentoring that became apparent in this study are discussed below.

The nine mentors who participated were chosen from third and fourth year students who had successfully completed a health and wellness elective unit focused on counselling and social interventions. While it was judicious to choose and train mentors with such background knowledge, the results of this study indicated that some mentors were more suited to this role than others. Specific personal qualities were apparent that led to successful mentoring. For example, some mentees stated that their mentor was encouraging or reassuring while other stated their mentor was willing to put themselves out in order to meet or contact their mentees. Therefore, careful screening of mentors according to previous study and personal qualities is recommended to ensure success of future mentor programs. We believe that is advisable to conduct interviews with prospective mentors (Clulow, 2000; Drew et al, 2000; Weisz & Kemlo, 2004). This way, those with positive attitudes and personal qualities, similar to successful mentors from this project, can be identified.

Because of the course specific requirements of the mentees, it makes sense that mentors for early childhood students come from early childhood courses. In conjunction with this, considering the negative impact of mentors knowing less than the mentees, we agree a better academic record is another necessary criterion. Therefore, for future selection, we aim to call for volunteers from the third and fourth year early childhood students who meet certain minimum academic requirements, and those who are short listed will take part in selection interviews conducted by a program coordinator and the successful mentors (from previous mentoring) to identify mentors with appropriate qualities (Clulow, 2000; Drew et al., 2000; Weisz & Kemlo, 2004). As some groups developed a good rapport with their mentor, we believe that student mentors are preferable to academic staff. This is in line with Dickson's (2000) finding, that TAFE students were reluctant to speak to academic staff. Furthermore, collaboration and partnerships are significant features of early childhood care and education workplaces, and it follows that practical experience in working with others who are undertaking similar study and field placement experiences will facilitate effective mentor relationships.

Findings of this study indicate that support in the form of training for mentors should be more extensive. This way mentors will be more skilled in facilitating the transition process and

may be more likely to devote more time to mentoring. We suggest that this can be achieved through a general training program for all mentors in the university system. Additional training for course specific issues can be undertaken at the course level. Training could be developed around the LOT model (Ten Cate, Snell, Mann, & Vermunt, 2004) which includes cognitive, affective and metacognitive aspects of learning. This would hold inherent benefits for mentors and mentees alike. If a university wide mentor training program was established it could offer ongoing support for mentors as well. As Rolfe-Flett (2000) suggests, ongoing monitoring and a multidimensional approach are crucial to effective programs. Further, while future mentors will not receive financial support, we suggest introducing academic recognition in the form of a training certificate (organised centrally in the university) or academic credit towards a unit in their degree program (Pollock & Georgievski, 1999).

It is also apparent that careful grouping of mentors and mentees is essential. Students reported forming close bonds in groups in which the mentees were of similar age and similar life experience such as the group of women over 30 who all had children. That is, the formation of “like” groups seemed to work. It is reasonable to argue that mentors should also be of similar circumstance. Weisz and Kemlo (2004) found that PAL leaders who shared commonalities with students in their groups were more effective in supporting learning. The use of similar backgrounds of mentees and mentors should be investigated further in group formation.

Interesting issues emerged in terms of course attrition. Some mentees left even though they were receiving guidance in their transition to university; however, many persisted with their studies and this was attributed to the mentoring program. Of concern are those who left. For some, personal issues were contributing factors; however, others experienced difficulties that led to withdrawal from the course. Mentors reported noting a lack of response to emails or non-attendance at meetings for mentees who ultimately left. These are possible indicators of future withdrawal that need to be flagged with future mentors. It is also important that mentors do not regard attrition as solely a consequence of their mentoring, and therefore, their responsibility. We suggest closer collaboration between mentors and program coordinators (Rolfe-Flett, 2000). Coordinators can then monitor cases of suspected attrition reported by mentors. Mentors also need to be informed in training of appropriate sources of professional expertise in dealing with mentees who are experiencing severe difficulties.

Communication within mentoring groups proved to very important, yet, at the same time, it was a challenge amidst course requirements. Lines of communication need to be maintained for shared guidance (Ten Cat et al., 2004) to be effective. Mentors need greater awareness of the various means of communication that need to be used throughout the semester including email, phone, SMS and the MATES Website/Discussion Forum. They also need specific training that emphasises the importance of finding the balance between guidance and self-regulation in learning that is, constructive friction (Vermunt & Verloop, 1999). The issue of mentors being absent while on field experience will be eliminated in the coming years when fourth year students will not participate in field experience in first semester. However, there were mentors who maintained contact with students. So, it may only be necessary to impress upon the mentors the need for constant contact with the mentees. This could become an item to address during selection interviews. Face-to-face mentoring was a very successful aspect of the program for example, being able to meet over coffee for support (Fowler, 2004; Muldoon, 2004). The mentors’ personal qualities contributed to this success. Email contact also worked reasonably well. In contrast, the web site did not appear to contribute to the success of the program; this is possibly due to the fact that the site was not accessible until approximately half way through the semester. This issue will be addressed in future mentoring programs.

While it is too early to attribute comparatively improved GPAs for the mentees to this mentoring program, this result is never-the-less encouraging. The results of this study will inform further developments and an improved mentoring program in the Bachelor of Education

(EC). Potentially improved GPAs is an exciting prospect that will be monitored closely with future mentees.

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